

Self-portraits of God

Studies in the Life and Work of Jesus

Inside this Lesson- Pictures from the Parables

General Introduction

Parables 1-4

Messages from the Parables

The Self-portrait

Parables as Mirrors

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Lesson 2 Pictures from the Parables

General Introduction

At the farm we have recently been enjoying watching the little dog and the little horse as they are growing up. These two are great friends. One day they were out in a small pasture playing along side of the fence. Little dog would suddenly jump at little horse as if he was going to bite him on his heels, and little horse would just as quickly turn and run as fast as he could along the fence to the other side of the field with little dog right behind him, barking as loud as he could! Little dog sounded very fierce! However when the two of them had reached the far side of the field little horse would slide to a stop, turn around very quickly, lower his head as if to bite little dog and chase little dog as fast as the two of them could go back to the near side of the field, where they would both stop, turn quickly around, and do it over again, until little horse got tired.

When little horse got tired he would suddenly stop running and hang his head down and go to sleep! When he woke up they would often start up their game again. Sometimes little dog would get tired of waiting for little horse to wake up. Then he would jump at little horse barking loudly while little horse was still asleep! Sometimes it worked and little horse would jump and start to run-- it seemed before he had awakened!

One day as I came around the corner I saw little horse with his head hanging down, sound asleep, in front of the children's swing set. When little dog

saw me he immediately remembered the sleeping horse, and just as quickly ran behind him, and marked furiously!

The sleeping little horse did what it seemed he had done many times before -- he leaped straight ahead! His head went between the chains for the swing; the seat of the swing came up across his chest; the swing set itself came down across his back, and he ran! Fast as he could go, he ran across the big field, jumped across a small creek, and continued to run as fast as he could for about a quarter of a mile before turning around and racing back to the house where I was now standing. Every little ways as he was running a piece of the swing set would break loose and fall into the field.

By the time he was near to me there was not much of the swing set left hooked to him -- just the swing across his chest with the chains going up to the main bar of the swing set, which was across his back. He stopped near where I was and stood perfectly still. His eyes were very large; he seemed to be very frightened, but he did not move. I approached him carefully so I would not get hurt if he suddenly decided to run again, but he did not move. He stood like a statue, crosswise in front of me. The one eye I could see him looking at me with was also motionless. As I unhooked the chain from the swing and dropped it on the ground, I expected him to run away but he did not move, even then.

I gently removed the bar of the swing set from his back and stepped back. He continued to stand very still for a moment or two, then tried moving forward. When the swing set did not follow him he trotted off, watching me, as if to say, thank you.

The point of this storytelling is of course to present the question -- is this story a parable? What is it that makes a parable a parable -- the thing we are going to be searching, looking for portraits, in this lesson?

A parable is a told-story presented by the teller so as to present to the hearer a real-life situation in which one can by association see the main point, or points, the speaker wishes to convey. Many times the elements making up the story are significant to the meaning or messages the teller of the story intends to be understood by the hearers. In such a case the parable can carry many messages, each attached to a portion or symbol of the story. That which makes a story into a parable is therefore seen to be the intent of the storyteller. The accuracy with which the elements of the told-story portray the message being illustrated is of course dependent on the knowledge of the storyteller regarding the object being used as a symbol for his message.

The desired function of a parable is to make clear by familiar association the presentation of ideas which by themselves may be strange to the hearer or hearers. The benefits of parable telling are several; but the greatest is probably the memories that come flooding back to the hearers each time they see the illustration used by the story teller happening again in the world around them.

The parables of Jesus are therefore stories He told to make clear and familiar to His hearers principles and ideas that might otherwise be unfamiliar -- principles that were the way of life in the Kingdom of Heaven that He was inviting them to become a part of. With parable telling the invisible glory of heavenly truths became visible by being illustrated with earthly things that were familiar to the people. Some of these stories told to people were themselves about people; stories like the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. The elements of daily life thus illustrated often became invested with a significance not recognized by their observers before hearing the parable.

As such the nature stories Jesus told as parables about the Kingdom of Heaven, and about daily life, made nature a vehicle of revelation; a vehicle generally unrecognized as revealing God's presence in daily life before Jesus used it for that purpose. The events of daily life as given understanding by looking through the windows of the natural world took on a special meaning -- they became, to the follower of Jesus, self-portraits of God and His Kingdom found in their own lives.

We turn now to a study of the parables Jesus told, and some of the messages they carry.

If these stories are at all new to you, you may find yourself wishing that you could have been present to listen to these presentations as Jesus spoke them. You might have wanted to ask some questions -- some of His hearers did! Jesus told stories about everything from yeast to figs that were not! But I'm getting ahead again!

Now to the stories.

Parable # 1

The first story

or parable , we are going to look at is of course a story that Jesus told; as such it is a story that is almost 2000 years old. But it is also a story that is so familiar that we could have taken it out of this morning's newspaper! This story is all around us. But it has an ending that carries a message which is almost always overlooked! Now to Jesus' story.

Then He said a certain man had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me. So he divided to them his livelihood.

And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living.

But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in the land, and he began to be in want.

Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.

And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself, he said, how many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!

I will rise and go to my father, and will say to him, father, I have sinned against Heaven and before you,

and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.

And he arose and came to his father.

But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.

And the son said to him, father I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.

But the father said to his servants, bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet.

And the bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry;

For this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.

And they began to be merry.

Now his elder son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.

So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant.

And he said to him, your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.

But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him.

So he answered and said to his father, lo, these many years I have been serving you; I have never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends.

But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.

And he said to him, son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours.

It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found (Luke 15: 11-32).

Setting and Analysis of this story

A father, two sons, and conflict over who is getting what; a familiar story, except that Jesus told it is a parable! So what is hiding in the story?

Notice the occasion for the telling of this story.

Luke 15: 1-3. Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him (Jesus) to hear Him.

(There was always a crowd around Jesus. On one location when He was talking to the multitude on the seashore they pushed so close to Him there was no space left for Him to stand and speak and be heard, so He got into a small boat and pushed out a little from the crowd. He seems to have preferred to be in the outdoors--many of His illustrations were drawn from nature. Also, there were no buildings large enough to accommodate the throngs of people following Him.)

And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, this Man receives sinners and eats with them.

(Jesus was nice to the people who came to see Him. He saw each one as they could be. The pure atmosphere surrounding Him, the gentle kindness with which He treated even the children, often caused people who came into His presence to wish to be worthy of His trust. It seems sometimes He did not even have time to eat.)

“So He spoke this parable to them.”

On this occasion (Luke 15:1-3), in responding to the complaints of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus told the story of the father and his two sons which we have just recounted; He also told a story about a lost coin and a story about a lost sheep.

In the story of a sheep which gets lost the sheep knows that it is lost, but it cannot help itself. It is dependent on the goodness and efficiency of a shepherd to find it and take it to safety. Fortunately for the sheep in this story there is a good shepherd, who represents Jesus, who seeks diligently for the missing sheep until he finds it and carries it home.

This is one of the most famous of Jesus' pastoral tales. It has often been the inspiration for an artist's painting. It is seen in Christian homes, in children's rooms, and in books around the world.

The second story Jesus told in responding to the Pharisees and scribes is the story of the lost coin. In this story of a coin that has been lost, the coin of course does not know that it is lost, or that it is a value; these elements are attached to the coin by someone who values it. In Jesus telling of the story the house is needing to be cleaned before the coin can be found! But when the coin is finally found the story is ended just as the story of the lost sheep-- there is a call to the friends to “come and rejoice with me; I have found that which was lost!”

In both these stories Jesus attached a value to that which was lost that is only revealed to the hearer or reader of the story when the final line of the story is told; the love of the owner for the central object of the story—a love so strong that whatever the recovering of the lost requires is not considered too high a cost to the owner who has lost the valued item. And when the recovery has been accomplished the recovery is accompanied by much rejoicing!

(In some of Jesus' stories, who the story was about was another element that was not clear until He said the final line!)

In the third story, the story of the father and his two sons reviewed above, these elements are again present; but there is much more. (This story was again for the complaining leaders!)

When Jesus divided this third story around two brothers, He used them to represent two kinds of people.

The first brother represents a group who have a very good life. They have all the necessities of life and the loving parent who guides and provides. But they are openly dissatisfied and want a change. When they can, they take their life into their own hands and live the way that seems to promise all that they have ever wanted; they leave the father's presence.

The second brother is used by Jesus to represent those people who give faithful service to the father and those around them, meeting the elements of life responsibly, for the reward of a steady and stable live.

The problem that the story brings to the reader is that neither son, the one who runs away, nor the one who stays home, loves the father; he is misunderstood by both sons.

The son who leaves home in search of happiness, and loses all, comes home to ask to be treated as a servant, while the son who stayed with the father and worked responsibly for him, instead of enjoying being in the father's presence, has been counting what wages will be received; as such he acts like a servant. This son despises his father because the father is good to those the son thinks are unworthy of the father's love.

In this dimension both sons are lost coin sons—they do not know that there is intrinsic value in themselves and those around them, even when those around them disagree with them.

Both sons are also lost sheep sons. They seek only those things which they feel are necessary for the existence of this life.

Jesus very gently puts the two sons who are at the center of the story in sharp contrast with the father.

In Jesus story the son who runs away from home and comes to see no value in himself is all the time the object of the father's love and concern; the father is presented as watching the road for him. And at the first intimation that the father's presence might be welcome, while the son is still a long way off, the

father runs to meet the son, the one who left the father's home to be free of the father's presence. In this, the son is not like the sheep; he could return home, if he chose to do so, but like the coin he does not know his own worth in the eyes of the father; nor does he know the character of the father- his father. This son only discovers the love of the father for him after he has turned to him as the source of that which is necessary for this life; but in turning he finds more than the necessities of life he was seeking for; he finds the loving father that was hidden from him before.

That love which he spent all he had to obtain he finds to have been beside him through all his journey, unrecognized, and therefore, like the presence of Jesus in the ship asleep, of no apparent value.

The other son, the one who stayed home and shared the father's house all those years also does not know of the love of the father for his brother, or for himself. Therefore when he sees his father very happy because his lost son is found again, he is not only surprised to learn of the father's love for his erring brother, but he is so unlike the father he has served for so long that he is unable to participate in the father's joy. He anticipates that the returned brother of his will be given by the loving father some of that which he believes he has earned the ownership of.

While the story shows the father assuring the angry son that all that he has is his, the stay-at-home brothers, not as wages, but as a gift, this son does not, in the story, enter the house to be family with his father and brother, and the celebrating servants of the father, who were able to enter into the joy of the father and consequently be in his home as participants in the father's joy—and as such become family to the father.

The story comes to an end with the son, who has been assured by the father that all the father has belongs to him, outside the home where the family reunion is going on, by his own choice. Those who are with the father are those who love what he loves, and therefore can enter into the joy of the father-members of His family.

Self-portraits appearing in this Parable

The self-portraits here are of three kinds of people-- those who discover the father to be their source of blessing; those who have by birth all they desire; and the father who loves all his children, while waiting for them to discover what he is like, so they can enter into his joy; something that is only possible as they come to love what he loves-- the joy of giving.

Portrait One

The story started with the Pharisees and scribes complaining; we therefore know that they are represented by the loveless brother who serves in

the family always, without discerning the father's character, or love for those who choose to be separate from the father's home; this portrait is of a child who does not know that it has a loving father.

Portrait Two

The brother who learned only at great cost-- all the father had was his brothers-- represents those who so often are given up on by their peers; or are thought to be of no worth. This brother is now a child who has learned, from the joy that sprang from his return, that every gift from the father is according to love; the love of the father who saw him as he could be-- and rejoices at the discovery. This portrait is of a father and a son.

Portrait Three

This picture is in a side-by-side photograph frame. This is because in the story there are two portraits of the father.

The first picture is of the loving competent father we all wish we had-- with no family that recognizes him.

The second picture is the reunion portrait; every one in the picture, father, son, and servers, is a member of the family we conclude because they rejoice with the father over the return of one who was lost and is home again.

The Center of the Parable

In the Old Testament we find a very gentle portrayal of what God is like when the prophet writes that as a father pities his children so the Lord pities those who serve Him. Jesus' parable of the father with two sons adds to this Old Testament portrait when it assures us that father is not only what God is like, it is what He is. Therefore we are not surprised that Jesus made all these stories end with the same ending; a call to, "come rejoice with Me." By rejoicing with God we become members of His family; sharers of His character.

Parable # 2

Another parable He spoke to them: The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened (Matthew 13:33).

Setting and Analysis of the Story

The Bible introduces this story by saying that the same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea.

And the great multitudes were gathered together to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat; and whole multitudes stood on the shore.

Then He spoke many things to them in parables (Matthew 13:3).

One of the parables that He told them on this occasion was the parable of the sower; one of the longest of the parables, when one seeks to explain it, for every detail in the story about the seed, the soil, the birds, the thorns, the sun, even the depth of the seed in the soil, is very significant to the message the story carries. No ingredient can be omitted without doing violence to the parable's life-application.

Our parable, which compares the kingdom of heaven to leaven, is, by contrast, one sentence long!

This leaven parable assumes the setting is understood. The many people surrounding Jesus are of all types; there are the rich and influential who were always near to see what Jesus was doing; the sick and lame, who were hoping for healing; and the curious who had time to go and observe, plus all those who were there, again, because of the spiritual blessings they received as they listened to Jesus' teachings and observed His works for the multitude.

The subject of interest is again the Kingdom of Heaven. The implied question being, how could Jesus set up a kingdom from this type of following? There were no soldiers and no state support. This question Jesus seeks to answer with the parables about the Kingdom of Heaven, parables which are never illustrated by the governments of this world.

Our parable, or story, about leaven suddenly becomes very central to finding the answer to the question as to how the kingdom can come from this kind of people, for it introduces an element that is not part of any of the kingdoms appearing in history, up to this time.

By this parable about leaven Jesus tells His hearers that His kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven, is invisible!

"The Kingdom of a Heaven is like leaven." This means, in part, that it comes from without, and must be introduced into its subject by some outside force; "the woman hid the leaven in the meal." This done the leaven was invisible; it would only become visible by result; "she hid it in the meal till all was leavened."

Therefore the matter of the setting up of the Kingdom is perhaps as interesting an issue to Jesus' hearers as are questions like, what kind of people will be in the kingdom once they have been leavened? And, once the kingdom has been set up, to what purpose is the kingdom and membership in it?

Often when Jesus had told the people stories, like the stories of the soil, and the wheat and the tares, in answer to questions from the hearers He explained the significance of each element appearing in those stories. But it seems no one asked the question that appears to be the central one in our story—what is the leaven? Therefore Jesus did not explain the story of the leaven, directly.

However there is another short parable that indirectly may give us an answer to our question, what is the leaven? It is the account of the withered fig tree.

To learn the information this story might contribute to an understanding of the parable of the woman hiding leaven in the meal, we will just hold our study of the leaven parable until we have examined this other story.

Parable #3!

This withered fig tree parable, parable # three in our study, is a story that is not a story! It is in fact one of the few parables Jesus not only spoke but acted out.

This unique parable is in parallel to the story of the woman hiding the leaven in the meal in several ways; but first, the account of what happened! Notice the record as found in Matthew 21: 18, 19.

Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry.

And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, "let no fruit grow on you ever again."

Immediately the fig tree withered away.

Notice the parallels to the leaven story-- in both parables the agent of change comes from without that which it affects; it is invisible; when introduced, its presence is made known by the results seen.

In these parables, the results are parallel—the fig tree withers while the meal is leavened.

However there are some differences.

In the story of the leaven the presence of the leaven as the agent of change is stated, though the identification of what the leaven represents as an actual agent in the setting up of the Kingdom of Heaven is not given.

In the acting out of the withering of the fig tree no agent of change is introduced, but the withering of the tree is tied to the words of Jesus; He speaks, the result follows.

In this parable of the fig tree the changes which are the object lesson of the parable are close followers of the words of Jesus. Notice, "Immediately the fig tree withered away."

This means that the setting up of the Kingdom of Heaven follows Jesus words; is intrinsically tied to the words of Jesus.

Jesus' words are here the outside force which, though invisible, produces the seen result.

But you say, this act seems to be strange! So, let's look at the circumstances surrounding this event.

Setting and Analysis of the Story of the fig tree being cursed

This story appears near the middle of the chapter in Matthew's record of these events (chapter 21). Jesus had just ridden a donkey into the city accompanied by large crowds of people. (This was the first time that we read of Him riding; He always walked.)

Then beginning at verse 12, we learn that having arrived inside the city

Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold doves.

And He said to them, It is written, My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves.

Then the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple and He healed them.

But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple and saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant and said to Him, Do You hear what these are saying? And Jesus said to them, yes. Have you never read, Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants You have perfected praise?

Then He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and He lodged there.

Next come the verses we are examining; the story of the fig tree.

Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry.

And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, let no fruit grow on you ever again. Immediately, the fig tree withered away.

The first thing we remember about fig trees is that it is the nature of the fig tree to start growing its fruit before its leaves appear; therefore, for one to see a fig tree with leaves is for one to know that the tree has already produced figs. Therefore, when Jesus saw the tree He knew by its appearance that it was declaring that it had produced fruit.

The message of the parable of the withered fig tree is to be seen in the light of the experiences which occurred on the day preceding this event. The fruit of Jesus' style of life was very apparent in the scenes in the temple, which were a partial fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah-- Our God will come; He will save us.

By contrast, the fruit of the lifestyle of those who were the religious leaders of the nation, those supposed to be representing God to the nation, was seen in the complaining leaders who could not enter into the rejoicing that was going on in the temple, God's house; the rejoicing that was a result of the work of Jesus as He went about setting up the Kingdom of Heaven—doing the work of God.

This act of Jesus in His withering of the fig tree left everyone well and healthy, but it also drew the attention of everyone who knew about it to the future of those who appeared to represent fruit for Jesus and His Kingdom, when they produced only leaves; they looked like fruit bearers, but they did no one service; their future was portrayed by the withered fig tree.

The point of these remarks is of course to see if these activities help us to understand the parable of the leaven; parable #2.

And one thing immediately stands out-- in the parable of the withering of the fig tree the active agent closely follows the words of Jesus. Therefore we can draw our first conclusion-- the Kingdom of Heaven has as its activating agent, the words of Jesus! The leavening follows the words of Jesus.

Conclusion

regarding the parables of the leaven and of the withered fig tree.

When the parable of the fig tree-withered reveals that it is the words of Jesus which lead to the results which are seen we learn that the message of the story of the leaven is that the Kingdom of Heaven comes by the gentleness of the inspiration of the word. No outside force is used for its establishment. But an outside agent must be introduced into the daily life of the soul for the Kingdom of Heaven to be visibly operating there.

The leaven, the words of Jesus, can produce results wherever it has been hidden by the one placing the leaven.

Therefore we can guess that the woman who hides the leaven in the meal represents the Holy Spirit, and that the leaven represents the grace of God—but we will have to look at another parable to determine if our guess is correct.

Let's look at one more story; our last one of this study on the parables of Jesus. (One needs a book on the parables of Jesus!)

Parable # four

Matthew 25: 1 – 13.

Then the Kingdom of Heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.

Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish.

Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.

But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept.

And at midnight a cry was heard: Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!

Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps.

And the foolish said to the wise, give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.

But the wise answered, saying, no, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but grow rather to those who sell and buy for yourselves.

And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut.

Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us!

But He answered and said, assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.

Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.

Setting and Analysis of the Story

Jesus had been doing interactive teaching with a variety of groups of people, including leaders of the people.

Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple. (This was a time when there was much building being done on the temple complex.)

And Jesus said to them, do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down. . . (Matthew 24:1,2).

Having said these things, Jesus and the disciples left the temple and the temple grounds and went to the Mount of Olives, which was but a short distance away.

Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, tell us when will these things be? And what will be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the age? (Matthew 24: 3)

In response to their questions Jesus makes some interesting comments, and tell some great stories- one of which is the parable of the 10 young women.

Through Matthew's record of this story there runs a timeline. The story just preceding it ends with a prediction of coming judgment (Matthew 24: 45-51). The parable following our story of the 10 young women, adds to the prediction of a coming judgment the element of personal accountability; with the accountability in the predicted judgment being based on the use made by the lord's servants of that which was his, and which he had given to them in trust to be used for good. (See Matthew 25:14-30.) That story, the parable of the talents, is followed by a descriptive story of the judgment itself (See Matthew 25: 31-46), often referred to as The Sheep and Goats Judgment.

The fascinating point of our story, the story of the 10 virgins, is that it is used by Jesus to reveal the way to be able to pass the coming judgment! This parable seems to be almost one in a class by its self, for while there are many elements to the story, as we will soon see, there is only one element of the story to study; all of its other elements are understood. This is one of the most fascinating of the parables!

Notice the elements:

1. People
2. Lamps
3. A wedding
4. A bridegroom
5. 10 Girls
6. Lamps to light the darkness
7. Oil in the lamps
8. Vessels for extra oil
9. A tardy bridegroom
10. All the girls sleeping
11. All the girls were invited
12. All the girls believe there was going to be a wedding
13. All the girls were properly dressed
14. All the girls awoke when the bridal party finally came
15. All the girl's lamps had been giving light to the darkness
16. All the girls lamps were now going out

The story is running so smoothly that one could almost go to sleep in church when Jesus suddenly introduces an unexpected element- some of the girls have failed to bring extra oil for their lamps!

Their plea to their companions to be allowed to borrow some of their extra oil from their personal vessels is as expected as is the polite refusal of those who have great desire to go with the bridegroom and his group; which group is already moving on.

The story ends with those who have stayed with the bridegroom going into the house with the bridegroom and the rest of his guests, while those who have gone to buy oil arrive too late to receive admittance; the door having been shut.

The rejection of the late-arrivers would perhaps be more surprising if it were not for the nature of the wedding party; those who made up the bridegroom's accepted guests were those who were ready at the time he came for them.

This element of time, introduced here as being ready on time, is continually present in all the stories making up this group of parables. They all cluster around the timeline-theme of readiness for the judgment; this readiness being based always on the preparations having been made before the arrival of the judgment.

As we noted earlier, there is only one unexpected element in our story of the 10 girls; the oil in the vessels for extra oil which is carried by only 5 of the waiting girls; which oil is additional to the oil all 10 girls are presented as having in their lamps. (Each of the actors in the story having in their possession a vessel for extra oil, as is indicated by the direct statement of that fact by the storyteller.)

The fascinating question that comes to us from this particular story is different from any of the other questions associated with the other parables we have looked at; question- what is missing in the story?! What is it that is not there for some of the girls?

This question would seem to parallel the issue of the unfaithful steward in the story of the talents, when condemnation came for not improving that which belongs to the master and which was given to the steward as a trust, except that in our story of the 10 girls there is no record of any improvement having been made by any of those girls who were accepted into the bridegroom's home. Neither is there a failure of desire, as in the parable of the father with two sons, where one chooses to stay outside the father's home; these girls wanted to be allowed into the house, even though the door had already been closed.

At this point one thing is clear. The girls in the story all have the capacity for carrying extra oil. The central question from the parable is therefore two-sided; what is it which is represented by the oil, and how does one buy it? A second issue is also quite easy to formulate; what is the appropriate time for buying the oil?

The parable answers the question of the appropriate time for buying the oil which makes one an accepted member of the accepted guests: while one is preparing to meet the bridegroom; before he comes.

The question as to what the oil represents is not answered in the story as told by Jesus while sitting on the Mount of Olives- maybe because nobody asked! But maybe because everybody already knew.

There is a fascinating story in the Old Testament that deals with oil in a particularly interesting context from the viewpoint of our story. (Oil appears in the Old Testament approximately 170 times; often in connection with directions regarding acceptable worship practices.) This story is found in the book of Zachariah, chapter's 3 and 4; we are particularly interested in that portion of the story which speaks of a lampstand and its oil. We are equally interested, however, in the accompanying dialogue.

In this story the prophet sees a lampstand of solid gold with the bowl on top of it, and seven lamps with seven pipes to the seven lamps. Two trees are by the lampstand, one on the right and one on the left of the lampstand.

Whereas the context is the Lord's work on behalf of His people, Zachariah asked the question we want him to ask, "what are these?"

The answer is twofold; the first answer is, "this is the word of the Lord."

Now we know what is symbolized by the lampstand- the word of the Lord.

The second half of the answer is in regard to how that work described in the passage will be accomplished. The prophet is told it will not be by might nor by power, but by the Lord's Spirit.

What makes this passage so interesting to our parable is the fact that this lampstand only functions with oil. The oil in this story is explicitly stated to come from the two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth (4:13,14). Therefore the message in this passage in Zechariah is very clear; when the prophet was told that the work would be accomplished by the Lord's Spirit we learned that the oil which makes things function is the power of the Spirit of God.

Now back to our story of the 10 girls. In this story the central element is the oil which is carried by some of the girls in their vessels for extra oil, as extra oil. We also notice that as in the story of the lampstand, the lamps only function when they are supplied with oil.

We can now understand the parable. All the girls heard the invitation and went out to meet the bridegroom, having planned to go with the bridegroom to the wedding. But some lacked the Spirit of the Lord in their personal lives- represented in the parable as the vessel for extra oil.

The message

which this parable carries by its context is to tell its hearers that the way to pass the coming judgment is to have the Spirit of the Lord functioning in your life, before the bridegroom comes;

that there is a time coming when the personal preparation will have to have been already made. The presence of the Spirit of the Lord in His word can guide you to the bridegroom, but a personal preparation is required for one to pass the coming judgment, and enter the home of the bridegroom.

The Center of the Parable

In this parable we have again the recurring central themes of invitation, and of the need for personal readiness; the personal readiness which is having the Spirit of the Father; it is this which makes one able to rejoice with Him. Here the negative conclusion pushes to the front. Those who were not admitted were those who though they had heard the invitation and intended to respond did not have the Spirit of God operating in their lives, and therefore they did not have the character of the Father.

In the context the message is clear- the Lord's work on behalf of His people will be accomplished, not by might nor by power, but by the Spirit of the Lord, while the question as to who has a proper preparation is answered in the story by the portrayal of the crisis in the life as being that which reveals the preparation having been already made.

The Self-portrait

here is of one who invites to participation in the happiness of his family- the marriage festivities of his son. But the invitees must make the proper preparation and come on time because the father loves his son and wills to give him only the best.

Messages from the Parables

We have seen four types of parables.

1. The told story
2. The lessons Jesus acted out
3. Natural acts interpreted
4. The story that starts with an observation regarding the world around Jesus and His hearers, and leads into a story that Jesus wants to tell.

Probably our favorite type of parable-story is the nature observation followed by interpretation. In these stories Jesus interprets the message which He Himself had given to the lilies, the weather, and the grass of the field.

He shows that the working power of the Kingdom of Heaven is invisible and comes from without. This working power is introduced by some outside force and only becomes visible by result. Here the Kingdom of Heaven works from within outward, until the essential nature is changed.

In the parables which Jesus told, the central teaching we now find to be about the working of grace.

In the parables we find the One who answers questions- not only about our lives but about what God is like as He works out salvation for His children.

The Self-portrait

is of the One who knows,

and who shares His knowledge; as such, the One who follows the Golden rule- do unto others according to your superior knowledge as they would have you do for them if they knew what you know.

Parables as Mirrors

In the mirror which is the individual parable we see looking back at us the revelation of a Presence we did not see without the mirror- the One making the object carrying the revelation.

Parables- revealer's of the presence of God. Self-portraits of the Creator.

